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WORSHIP IN THE SUNDAY SCHOOL

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Worship is invaluable for the religious life and education of children. Its importance in the Sunday school is fully acknowledged by the amount of time and energy devoted to worship by Sunday schools everywhere. The ways and means of promoting worship are always a problem; and there are unmistakable signs of a general demand for a reconsideration of traditional practice.

The problem may be discussed under the questions of the organization of Sunday-school worship, the ideas which should be expressed, and the form or quality of the literary and musical material to be employed.

I. THE ORGANIZATION OF SUNDAY-SCHOOL WORSHIP

1. Worship in the Sunday school should proceed by actual worship and the exposition of the forms employed; and these two exercises should be prosecuted separately. Nothing in education is more obviously learned by doing than worship. Here experience is the best teacher. How direct and vital are the spontaneous prayers of children! How quickly they learn to pray, and how well! On the other hand, how easy it is for children's prayers to become perfunctory, when they repeat forms phrased by others! It is true that set prayers, psalms, and hymns should be used. They may voice profounder experiences than children entirely understand; but they excite the sentiments which they express and are invaluable for the richest spiritual culture of childhood. For this purpose, however, they must be made as intelligible as possible. Forms of worship must be expounded as expressions of religious experiences of those who use them. Meaningless repetition of noble sentiments positively dulls religious sensibility and fosters formalism. Worship without a pointed insistence upon the solemnity of adoring divine virtues is worse than a toleration of insincerity. It permits a culti-

vation of hypocrisy, and that with the aid of poetry and music. Worship may make or mar the soul of any child. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of interesting and vital expositions of the contents of worship used in Sunday-school services.

But actual worship and the exposition of worship are essentially different processes. Worship is worship; and the study of worship is a preparation for worship. If the two be mixed, it is actual worship which suffers. Drilling in music or explaining subject-matter distracts the attention from adoration to the mere mechanics of worship. Striving for effect supplants effort at self-expression. Religious emotion is exhausted by counter-currents of feeling. Reverence is discouraged; for devotion languishes if it is not sufficiently sustained.

Children are in constant need of worship. They should be allowed to worship as they may worship, and no hand of Uzzah should be stretched out meanwhile to save the occasion. When the formal worship of the day is concluded, the children may be corrected, if need be, for indifference, taught something regarding religious meditation and the meaning of the language of devotion, and drilled as much as necessary in the mechanics of melody and enunciation. The lack of reverence more or less remarked in many Sunday schools may be attributed in part, no doubt, to other causes, but the need of a full opportunity for children to understand what they utter, on the one hand, and a fair chance to worship, on the other, have more to do probably with a want of reverence than anything else.

As far as possible, forms of worship should be explained and practiced before they are used at all, and presumably on the Sunday before they are formally used. The ritual employed for actual worship in Sunday schools should be short; for children cannot sustain religious emotion as long as adults. But many selections may be used for the purpose in turn. The variety desired will be secured by this plan; and the order of the forms most persistently used may be changed for the same purpose. A psalm or prayer may be chanted one Sunday, which is repeated without music on another. Hymns themselves may be read sometimes responsively.

Talks on worship should include the nature and function of worship and the history and meaning of hymns and other symbols. The

value of worship in the Sunday school depends in the last analysis upon children's clearly understanding what worship is. If we define it as filial converse with a heavenly Father, worship will be used to stimulate filial conduct to God, and not to please him by the etiquette of ceremony. In the latter case, God would be thought of in the guise of an oriental king; in the former, as a Father to whom polite nothings in the language of worship would be painful flattery. If worship is the adoration of God's character, exciting active co-operation with the divine purpose, it will readily accomplish great spiritual results; for love of God will grow by expression, and ardor for moral effort by praising different virtues found in him, and prayer, as a meditation upon God's purposes, will furnish practical direction for the religious zeal excited. Too often, however, worship is conceived to be a means of encouraging awe of almighty power. Awe begets a feeling of helplessness, discouraging to ethical activity. This is the worship of paganism. It is incompatible with the approachableness of our heavenly Father as revealed by Jesus.

2. The officers in charge of worship in the Sunday school should be: a conductor of worship, presumably the superintendent; a teacher of the literary and musical material employed, preferably the pastor; and a vocal musician. These functions may be discharged by either one or more persons. But no occasion certainly could present itself to a pastor for more informal, opportune, and direct talks to the children of the church than the office recommended for him to fill, nor one where so many phases and phrases of religious experience would be so inevitably suggested for explanation to those whom it should be recognized as the principal business of his profession to instruct.

One at least of the officers in control of the worship of a Sunday school should be as good a musician as the church can supply. As long as the quality of hymnbooks, for instance, is regulated by the demands of the general market, the popular taste to which publishers cater is as apt to deteriorate as not. Vigorous effort is necessary to educate the taste of Sunday-school authorities for what is really good. To this end, the regulation of Sunday-school worship should be placed in the hands of experts. The children and Sunday-school teachers alike will not tolerate what is inferior, once they have enjoyed what is better, especially if the improvement is radical.

II. THE IDEAS WHICH SHOULD BE EXPRESSED IN WORSHIP

1. The ideas should be true. This much will be conceded by every reader. But to use only truthful expressions in worship is a real task and calls for rules of its own. Hymns or prayers should be selected subject to a careful test of the truth of the ideas which they contain. Some hymns must be wholly excluded from Sunday-school services, and some stanzas always omitted from otherwise good hymns. No forms of praise, prayer, or profession of faith should be allowed to retain any phrase which children must use with mental reservation.

We are not here concerned with the mooted question of whether forms of expression which call for mental reservations should be employed by adults themselves. Children naturally say what they mean and mean what they say. They learn to mean whatever they sing or recite. Young children especially are incapable of maintaining a double line of thought such as speech with mental reservation involves. Deliberately to cultivate this sophistry in older children is to jeopardize frankness in the expression of religious ideas. Against this no compensation can rightly be urged. If any double standard should be tolerated in the use of language, surely the higher one should be demanded for addressing God and talking upon religious subjects—at least, let us say, in the religious education of children. Let us run no risks of “offending” God’s little ones. Indeed, we have quite another use for erroneous symbols. They serve to point out ideas to children which are frequently uttered, but are nevertheless untrue.

2. The ideas expressed in worship should be important. All that is serviceable in public worship is necessary for a Sunday school. Not only are the religious sentiments of children to be expressed in the services of the Sunday school, but all the forms of worship used in church services are valuable for the older students; and the Sunday school as a school of worship should both cultivate a taste in children for church services and educate them in an intelligent use of church forms of worship. The character, scope, and variety of the forms will be determined for each school by the habit of the particular church to which it belongs.

Worship should be addressed to God. This follows if worship

is to be worship. Some so-called songs of praise are addressed to no one in particular. Others are worse for being exhortations to fellow-beings. Such hymns are seldom poetry. They are never worship. Hymns and prayers are addressed at best to God the Father. This accords with the emphasis of Jesus and his every utterance upon the subject of worship; and children cannot be taught too thoroughly the direct approachableness of God. "The Father himself also loveth you" is the essence of Jesus' revelation.

Worship for children of all ages should celebrate both the individual and the social aspects of Christianity. Current forms of worship abound in celebrations of the relations of the individual to his divine Father. But the social relations of the individual to other members of the divine family than God the Father and Jesus Christ are seldom considered. The brotherhood of man is a rare subject of hymns, and God's purposes for the corporate units of society are almost entirely confined to the subjects of the church and pagan nations awaiting evangelization. The kingdom of heaven on earth as such, is almost ignored, and the Christian family also. And where shall we find hymns celebrating divine ideals of municipal, industrial, and national life? International peace is only less rare a theme of divine providence in modern hymnology. Current hymns, moreover, are too emphatically doctrinal, too engrossed as a rule with the bliss of a future life, to be sufficiently concerned with charity, justice, and moral reform. Consequently it is almost, if not quite, impossible with the hymns available properly to emphasize all that is important for Sunday-school worship.

3. The ideas expressed in worship should be suitable. The literature and music alike of Sunday-school worship should be graded according to the stages of development of childhood and youth. It is sufficient to distinguish the three general epochs of infancy, middle childhood, and youth. The elemental ideas of God and conduct should be celebrated in the primary department of the Sunday school: God himself being valued as a heavenly Father for very much the same qualities of a provider, protector, and ruler, for which the human parent is relied upon in the infancy period. God as Teacher and Friend, who confides his reasons for commands, should be prominent in the conceptions of worship celebrated in the early

school- or conscience-building period of middle childhood; and God as sacrificial Father, with unbounded faith in the responsive love of his children as leaders in establishing his kingdom in the world, should be emphasized in the worship of the youth and adult period of Sunday-school students. To this end, Sunday schools do well, of course, to have the primary department worship by itself. Nor is it without some distinct advantage to have each of the other departments of the Sunday-school worship separately.

III. THE FORM OF THE LITERARY AND MUSICAL MATERIAL

As a rule every literary and musical composition employed in Sunday-school worship should be a masterpiece. Every hymn should be poetry. The music of Sunday-school no less than church services should have the quality of dignity. Ecclesiastical music, it may be freely admitted, should be more generally cheerful than was demanded half a century since. Classical hymns are too often set in a minor key. But religious music should always excite adoration, never an impulse to dance, and worship in a Sunday school should cultivate a taste for the stately services of the church, and never for light opera.